



To: Members of the Appropriations Committee
From: Roberta J. Cook, President and CEO
Re: Appropriations Committee Budget Hearings: DCF
Date: February 25, 2022

H.B. 5037 An Act Concerning the State Budget for The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefor.

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Minor, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee: I am Roberta Cook, President/CEO of BHcare, a Certified Behavioral Health Clinic serving more than 3,000 adults, children, and families in the Greater New Haven, Shoreline and Lower Naugatuck Valley area. As part of our service system, we operate an Outpatient Psychiatric Clinic for Children in Derby, we have child clinicians in our Outpatient Clinics in Ansonia and Branford, and we operate an Intensive Outpatient Program at Shoreline Family Health Care in Branford.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H.B. 5037 An Act Concerning the State Budget for The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefor.

Community nonprofits like BHcare provide essential services in every city and town in Connecticut, serving people in need and employing tens of thousands. They are what make Connecticut a great place to live and work.

Year number two of the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have an extremely negative impact on the behavioral health needs of children and adolescents in our community. Year number one caused severe isolation, doubt and fear in our children. They worried about their families, their friends and themselves. We know that many children suffered academic setbacks during their time at home. However, equally if not more important, their social and emotional growth was delayed and that may have more long-lasting effects and serious consequences. It is during these important years, spending the majority of their time with peers, teachers and other important role models, that social and emotional development occurs. This is when children learn how to act, how to cope, how to get along with others, how to handle stress and how they feel about themselves.

In the past two years, we have seen a significant increase in anxiety, depression, suicidal and self-harming behaviors, and an increase in substance use. And, although returning to school is a good thing, in year number two we have seen many children experiencing severe anxiety and depression about returning to school, and a great deal of school avoidance. Meanwhile, schools are seeing a significant increase in problematic and concerning behaviors. And the severity of these problems has resulted in our hospital emergency departments becoming overwhelmed by the number of children visiting the EDs with mental health symptoms.

These children's behavioral health problems are happening in our communities, in their homes, in their schools and in their neighborhoods. The answer to reducing and addressing these problems lies within the local community provider systems. Our agencies have evidence-based practices to deal with children's mental health problems especially those caused by childhood trauma. We have existing crisis response services, wrap around services, care coordination, in-home services and extensive prevention services. And we are already working closely with local school systems to help them deal with the problems they are seeing.

What we need is additional resources. While the problems have escalated off the charts in the past two years, funding for nonprofits and reimbursement rates for our services have been relatively stagnant for more than ten years. Many staff have left the field for less stressful jobs with equal or better pay and benefits. This has compounded the stress on existing staff. We now have a thirty percent staff vacancy rate in our organization. We have the expertise to help with these problems, we need the capacity and workforce to address the additional demand. This year, nonprofit organizations are seeking an 8% increase in state funding.

I would also like to express my strong opinion that State Department of Education budget enhancements to address children's behavioral health problems should be used for school systems with the condition to contract with local children's behavioral health providers to provide behavioral health services on-site in their schools. As mentioned above, the state has spent years developing evidence-based practices in children's outpatient clinics to address children's mental health problems. These are the same community providers who already offer the crisis response services, wrap around services, care coordination, in-home services, and extensive prevention services in the community. Children experiencing mental health problems should immediately be assessed and connected to the local community service system and the best way to do that seamlessly, without having children and families fall through the cracks, is to begin engagement with those community systems right in their local schools. I urge you to take this into consideration when developing the 2023 budget.